

Leading into the Future

Steve Frye, Chief Ranger, Glacier NP, Type I Incident IC

“Fire Management” used to be called “Fire Control” and it may not seem like a big difference, but it affects how one approaches wildland fire. Steve began working as a firefighter with a Pulaski in 1966. At that time, the idea of providing information on fire to the public was “verboten.” He said the fire world was opposed to people knowing in detail what they did. As times changed that attitude brought the challenge of educating the public so that they could understand the role of fire in the ecosystem. To this day, he said, Forest Service employees could not talk about the benefit of fire in a suppression strategy or on IC teams they are working on.

In talking about change in the public land mission, Steve said what happens in fire management will define how the US Forest Service will change over the next five years and that will define the future of the US Forest Service.

Fires present a lot of risk to those fighting them, but they also present opportunities. We have evolved to a place where the information officer has been elevated to a command position. He encouraged everyone to always include education in fire messages and that some of the best teachable moments are offered while on a fire because of the direct impacts to the public and the relevance of the timing. Steve stated that his basic team strategy as an incident commander was to bring the greatest power to bear on a fire or emergency including every member of his team. To that end it is vital to have open communication up and down the chain of command and that the strength of a team is in its diverse disciplines.

He noted that as NPS employees and information officers bring an education function that is critical to the objectives of an incident commander. Accept this responsibility and exploit every opportunity to teach or to give information on fire education. The whole business of incident management is about relationships, relationships founded in trust. Information and education are the external face where we build trust and relationships with those affected by fire.

Steve was on the Haymen Fire for 28 days. At first, there was a high degree of mistrust for federal officials; the situation required him to develop trust with the people who already had been out of their homes for three weeks. The strategy to accomplish this was very aggressive outreach that showed empathy and a human aspect, not a bureaucratic face. It involved two public meetings a day with anywhere from 500 to 1,500 people attending. Through those meetings he rebuilt confidence in the abilities of the firefighters, the U.S. Forest Service, and the state of Colorado and strengthened ties in person-to-person neighbor relationships. It also built confidence for future fires.

Steve discussed that there can't be a fire prevention program without a thorough understanding of what fire is all about. The public is becoming more sophisticated about fire; the public's high expectations demand very large and detailed products from information officers. He discussed how to convey a level of detail in a manner that is understandable and meaningful to the public because the technical abstract of fire often escapes clear understanding. For Steve to succeed as an incident commander, he knew it was up to the information officer staff to come up with a communications strategy. It took several experiments to get the right match of technical and lay

language. Each fire is different and the method used to reach the public will depend on the situation.

Steve said the NPS information officers are a “cut above all other state and federal agencies.” The NPS brings more to the program including a historical perspective and the interpretive element. As an example he talked about a lesson they learned on the Yellowstone fires on 1988 where they decided that they needed to convey the message that the Yellowstone fires were beneficial, however, the public unfamiliarity with the huge conflagrations they were witnessing did not allow that message to be understood at that time. Instead, the public saw the fires as devastating. To that end they learned a lesson about the timeliness of messages presented by information officers.

The NPS is leading change in fire management. Some of the NPS ideas are accepted and some are not, but regardless, NPS information officers are leaders and teachable moments will arise. The steps being taken by the NPS with regards to fire communications and education is not being done by any other agency. These new programs will bring a value-added perspective to the fire management business.

Steve’s Basic List of Assumptions for Incident management.

- He again stressed the importance of relationships. “It’s how you get your job done,” he said. Trust, empathy and understanding are all qualities that are very important to building relationships. Don’t be afraid to be a real person. When he left the Hayden Fire he told the residents he had met and come to know that “a little piece of my heart will stay with you people,” and that he really meant it.
- Focus on the external, but don’t forget about the internal. People involved with the internal side of incidents don’t always know what is going on. You need to make sure they feel that they are a part of the bigger picture because of potential issues and roadblocks. Make sure you go all the way to the bottom of the chain of command and spend some time and effort there. Follow up with an e-mail or call to let them know you appreciate them. Talk about things other than fire, personal things and don’t be afraid to suggest thanking the community. As an information officer you are an important tool; you are the public face of that effort, so don’t be shy, speak up. You are the professional when it comes to fire information and fire education; you are prepared and can do the job.
- Politics is how we do our job. It is in the funding, policies, authorities and positions. PIOs spend time with political figures and their support is critical to short and long term goals

Follow-up questions

When asked how to deal with citizens trying to get involved in fire management tactics, Steve recommended not “pulling rank” but the use of “successful approximation” a tactic in which you steer them in the direction you want to go by rewarding them into heading your way.

Steve answered another question about home owners who do not want to evacuate by saying you must tell those people that the tactics of fighting the fire will change from saving structures to saving lives and that may change the amount of protection available to other homes in the area. He also agreed that firefighter safety could be compromised in that lifesaving role.

In dealing with people directly impacted by fire he encouraged information officers to try to relate ground tactics to broader goals and to talk in terms the public can understand.

He summed up by asking the group to accept the importance of the information officer's role and understand that where the NPS goes with fire will be where the entire federal fire programs goes nationally. He said information officers must build trust and bring accountability to the job.

Steve offered that if anyone wanted to talk with him, he would be pleased to do so and encouraged people to e-mail or call him.